THE RIOT COMMISSION'S REPORT

THE HONORABLE JAMES C. CORMAN*

In selecting the members of the Riot Commission, the President was trying to get a reasonably good cross-section of people who are in the middle on race relations. He was criticized by some because no one really considered Roy Wilkins a black militant. No one appointed was a member of the Klu Klux Klan either; but just to limit it to eleven people we did represent a rather broad cross-section of the people in this country.

One of the first things each of us did was go through a mental process. The eleven of us had been given a great opportunity, an opportunity to say something that perhaps someone would listen to. We floundered around some; some members talking about how we needed to get massive programs passed, but we were not an action committee. The President called us together and asked us a few basic, simple questions and we had to try to answer them, and answer them in a way that he would believe us. He was the one we were going to speak to; but perhaps more importantly, we wanted to say what needed to be said in a way that the people who needed to be talked to would listen, although we did not really know, at first, who we ought to be talking to. We concluded that we ought to talk to that broad cross-section of white Americans who really make the decisions about where this country is headed. Fortunately, we have a government of people, and it is their decisions that ultimately become the law or the course of action that we take.

The President asked us to find out what happened and why it happened and what ought to be done about it; and in the "why it happened" portion, because of the similar disorders in a number of cities in a relatively short time he wanted us to comment on whether there was a conspiracy in this land. We set out to do that as best we could. We were well financed. He instructed all the federal agencies to cooperate with us, to give us all the information we might want, and we had a good staff.

The problem seemed much worse at the time of the Commission's assignment than it did after we had looked closely at the disorders; and yet there were *serious* eruptions in our cities. The Commission

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initially felt that the roots of the problems in the summer of '67 had to do with racial inequality and discrimination.

After picking up and looking at the conspiracy theory, we threw it away.

A lot of people believe that all of this is the result of a plot by international Communism to overthrow the government. A lot believe it's a black nationalist conspiracy to destroy us, or to get their own country. We did spend a good bit of time attempting to analyze that part of the problem and we concluded, unanimously, that the disorders in the summer of 1967 were not caused by, or a result of, conspiracies. We went on to point out that efforts had been made to conspire but they were pretty well handled by the police. A lot of people believed, and I suppose still believe, there was a conspiracy; we did not really convince everybody.

We had to look much deeper than conspiracy for the answer. We had to look primarily at our history. Really, almost all of our present problems started some place in our history, and this one really started when the colonists came over here. They were accompanied by some Negroes, and decided, after they got here, that maybe they ought to own the Negroes for agricultural labor. They had not figured out the bracero program yet. They hit upon this plan; and so a substantial number of people coming here to seek new freedoms for themselves, sometimes religious freedom, sometimes economic freedom, sometimes political freedom, brought other human beings with them — human beings that they believed they owned and could sell and buy, and even destroy if they wanted to. Even through our revolution and our adoption of the constitution, we preserved that system. It was very hard for the founding fathers to justify, when they believed that we all had God-given rights and are all equal. But they resolved the problem and it worked for some 75 or 80 years. The rest of the world was rejecting this practice, yet this nation, so dedicated, hung onto the practice until they had a violent civil war.

Everyone concedes the civil war was not just to free the Negroes. It had economic and political implications too. However, at the end of the war, by the adoption of the three post-civil war amendments, the nation told the Negroes that they were now free and equal. We tried to write that as firmly as we could and yet, after a very brief period of experimenting, we decided we did not really want to try any longer, so we evolved the old equal but separate theories and again preserved for ourselves, for another 60 years or so, a real tough problem.

We said that we espoused great slogans of freedom and self-determination and so forth but we did not really mean it for the Negroes. "We are going to put you in the back of the bus, put you in

the tumble-down schoolhouse and put you in the houses across the tracks and we are going to do it by passing laws saying that is where you have to go." And so, although we chipped away at it, it was not until 1954 that the Supreme Court finally struck down the last vestige of the legality of the government's segregating people by virtue of their race.

Now that was not very long ago, 1954, and not much has happened since that time for most of the Negroes who live in this country. If they read the Brown decision, or someone told them about it, and they thought things were going to change greatly for them, they were to be disappointed. Things did not change, because what we were unable to do by force of law, we were able to do by customs and social patterns and gentlemen's agreements.

Along with that evolution, we saw America grow very rapidly and the population shift. The shift started in World War I. Not many of us remember that war but we do remember the song, "How are you going to keep them down on the farm after they've seen Paris". You could not keep them on the farms — they went to the cities, but just in little dribbles. Then along came World War II, and everybody got involved. The Negroes flocked to the big cities for the same reasons that the whites did. It looked like a better place to live and it offered greater economic opportunities. But when they got there, they found that we still put them someplace all to themselves and away from us, because that was "more comfortable for them and us too."

Our cities then began to evolve into a core city of all Negroes, living in the more delapidated housing sections, the areas which get very poor public services. This is almost uniformly true throughout the country. All of this is surrounded by a periphery of suburbs that are new, nice, clean and big, and relatively inexpensive. There we sit with about twenty per cent living in the core and the other eighty per cent keeping them there.

No one would contend that this segregation has been total. If you look hard, you can find a Negro movie star or maybe a Negro Ph.D. in my district who looks like a white suburbanite. However, in a real sense, we have a higher level of segregation in our major cities now than we saw in the rural south fifty years ago. With all of the hope and the promise of this nation, the Negro witnessed, over the years, the denial of his legal rights, and the growing affluence of the white people around him. He got angry and frustrated and had very little sense of either self-respect or self-discipline, and that, it seemed to the Commission, was the basic underlying cause of the racial disorders.

It is true that there is a relatively high degree of poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and lack of all types of public services in ghetto areas. These things came together, starting early in the summer

of 1965 and accelerating rather dramatically in the summer of 1967; there is no great hope that we are going to have any kind of de-escalation this summer.

The spark which caused trouble, in almost every instance, was some relationship between the white policeman and the Negro ghetto resident. It is at this point that the two societies necessarily meet, and they meet as adversaries, and that is not totally the fault of either one. Looking at it from the point of view of the ghetto resident, what does the man in the uniform with a gun mean to him? That man symbolizes the whole white society which keeps him penned in and depressed. Even a traffic ticket can be a bigger burden for a guy who is unemployed than it is for you or me — a mere $3 fine paid by our attorney. For a ghetto resident it often means telling his boss he has to be in court, losing a day's work because of court delays and transportation problems, appearing in court where there are only other Negroes, and paying in his fine a much larger part of his week's wages. It is the man in uniform who comes to evict him from his house if he cannot pay his rent, or to repossess his television set if he misses a payment — all of the things that depress him. I do not think that anyone can deny that, by and large, policemen treat poor people differently from wealthy people and they treat poor Negro people differently from poor white people. It is almost impossible to get uniform law enforcement, no matter how effective your force. It is also true that conduct which might go unnoticed if directed to a white person, to a Negro would open up a wound that exists because of the discrimination against him all his life.

But what about the young white policeman? He is, almost without exception, totally untrained to cope with the problems in the ghetto area, or to understand anything about the people who live in the ghetto. He does not know why they disobey the law or how to treat them so they will not disobey the law. He knows he is moving in an area where he has 10 times as much chance of suffering bodily harm as if he were patrolling in an all-white suburb.

The Commission made many suggestions as to how to solve this problem. We suggested that America has three courses. We can retain the status quo, but if we do that, we must anticipate a substantially increased military police force. We can enrich the ghetto. This would cost a great deal of money but it is favored by many people. Somehow you feel more humane when you talk about making things nice for the people in the ghetto where you hope they will stay. But this leads us right back to the old equal but separate theory. The Commission urges that the United States give serious consideration to tearing down the institutions which have separated us, and we speak rather harshly about them. I think a lot of people might have missed

our point; I hope not. Maybe we used a bad term when we said America is guilty of "white racism." I doubt that very many of us are white racists in the context that we have an active dislike, fear or hatred of Negroes. We just are not that kind of people and are not guilty of that kind of sin. But we are perfectly willing to tolerate institutions and practices which are horribly racially discriminating. I think Herblock's cartoon the day following the issuance of the report is as good a commentary as I have yet seen. On one side of the cartoon was a ghetto, steaming and overcrowded. On the other side was a beautiful high-rise apartment with a penthouse on the top, with a fellow lying in the sun, a drink in one hand, looking over the Commission's report, and he said, "What do they mean it's my fault? I've never even been in the ghetto." That's right, he never has, and most of us never have.

We talk about the institutions that perpetuate the separation between races, and we condone them. I could not help being struck this morning when I read that Martin Luther King started his march at an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Memphis. John Wesley was the founder of Methodism. He broke away from the Church of England in the late 1700's because he felt it was not serving the social needs of England. He thought the teaching of Christ ought to be taken down into the slums and ought to be concerned with the well-being of fellowmen. Methodism finally came to this country; it was one of the earliest religions here and is now one of the biggset. We Methodists wanted to make it clear that we had room for Negroes and room for whites, and so the African Methodist Episcopal is the Negro part of our church. This is an institution founded on the teachings of Jesus, and given new meaning by John Wesley, a man concerned about the well-being of his fellowman. Yet we have institutionalized racial segregation. We are gradually overcoming this, but not very fast.

There has been some change in recent years in one of our biggest institutions — the military. In World War I, Negroes were not permitted to fight for their country. When they volunteered they were put in all-Negro units, shipped off to Europe, and assigned to the French. Pershing told them, "Don't put them in combat because they're not reliable." There are many young Marines in Viet Nam tonight who can tell you from personal experience that the Negroes are reliable buddies to have alongside of you when you get in a scrap. As late as World War II there still was no integration of military units. In 1944 I sat in an officer's tent of an all-Negro labor unit, with white officers. All officers lived and ate in one tent. A Negro chaplain, a captain, was assigned to the unit. Although the other fellows were crowded, when the Negro officer came in and introduced himself, one officer said, "Glad to have you, Reverend, we were just moving." This officer

moved out that night and left the Reverend his tent, because he did not want to sleep in the same tent with a Negro. We do not do that anymore, but those are institutional things that we had condoned and still condone today.

The day of our last meeting Roy Wilkins said he had gotten a call from a friend in Tallahassee, Florida. She said, "Roy, things are really changing. My husband and I went to a movie last night and in the opening scene a Negro man was kissing a white woman, and nobody burned the theater down." There you are, we are changing all over. You can see it all around, and yet those of us who have lived in the white ring all of our lives, really have not looked closely enough at what is happening in the ghetto area or at what it is like to be a Negro. We ought to do it.

During the course of our investigation we all went out to the ghetto areas. I went down to Tampa, Florida, because I had heard about the White Hats. The White Hats were some Negro young men who had helped stop the riots. I wanted to see how this had worked.

Tampa had what was really the beginning of a full-blown riot. On the second night the State Chairman of the Human Relations Committee came to the police department and said, "I know the boys involved and I believe I can help." So the police cooperated with him. He went into the riot, pulled out five boys, and talked with them. They went back in and got some of their buddies and they all came out. The police then gave them white helmets, and they went back in and stopped the riot.

We talked to the five leaders a couple of months later. They were all between 18 and 22. They have all been in jail; one of them had been in prison. However, they had many of the traits that the Marine Recruiting Officers look for. You could just tell by their look and conduct that they were born leaders. One of them told me that when he left home that night to join the riot, he went out to burn Tampa down. They were going to burn the Negro section and then they were going to move over and burn down all of the white downtown business section. After he talked with Hamilton he decided he would stop the riot if he could, and he did. I asked him what happened to make him change his mind and he said, "Well, Congressman, that's the first time anybody gave me anything important to do and I wasn't going to fail." It seems to me that there is a great wealth of young men that we have sealed off. We must find ways to reach them and give them important things to do.

It seems to me there are some significant things that we can do between now and the next long, hot summer. They may dissipate some of the friction and alleviate some of the problems. The first step is

to give a hand to the policeman. We have to teach him how to enforce the law in the ghetto area. We have to make him understand that his role there is the same as his role anyplace else, to protect the residents from the criminals. He is not down there to protect the white society from the Negro society. We have to, as best we can, convince the people who live in ghettos that the kind of police brutality and police misconduct under which they have suffered for years is going to be put to an end; this convincing is going to be hard to do. We need very badly to do these two things.

We need to get the great mass of young people busy in the summers doing something that is constructive and satisfying — something that holds some hope for them.

If you read the profile of a rioter, you find he was generally a young person who had some education but who was either unemployed or under-employed. I suppose the most dangerous person that you will find in the ghetto is a college graduate who is shining shoes or cleaning toilets. If he never got past the second grade, he may not have noticed anything else that he could do; when he is a high school graduate or college student and he finds this is where he will wind up, he is a real problem. We need to find jobs commensurate with each person's capacity — jobs that hold some promise of advancement. The very young, too young to work, need to be kept in school where they have a chance to catch up. Most of our schools have just not met the challenge of teaching kids who come out of ghettos. They need extra attention, teaching, recreation facilities, and organized recreational activities, they need to be usefully occupied. They need the same things you and I need and that is to have the satisfaction of thinking they have a place in this country, that there is hope for them, and that tomorrow is going to be better than today. And they need to know that they are going to be judged on what they do rather than the color of their skin.

We wanted this Commission to say as many significant things as it could, as intelligently as it could, but to say them unanimously. We did not agree on all of the proposed solutions, because they are simply that, proposed solutions. But we did our best to tell the American people the underlying root causes of the problems in this nation, and what was going to happen to us if we did not change our ways. We did that unanimously, and I sincerely hope that the American people do not decide to reject our recommendations. If the American people reject it, I think we will lose a great deal of what is American, because I do not think that we can, from this point on, keep twenty per cent of our people in the position of second-class citizens. Freedom and equality are just too basic to our system. No one can argue with that. We have done pretty well to this point; it is true the Negroes were a lot worse off a generation ago and they weren't rioting in the streets. But

it is the man who sees light at the end of the tunnel who is the most eager to get there. I think the Negro has seen the light at the end of the tunnel and he wants to get there. He wants to get out into this great country of ours and be like the rest of us. He is entitled to it. It is in our own self-interest that we let him.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: Will Dr. King's march on Washington have any effect on the civil rights legislation?

Answer: My hope is that we will pass the bill on the 11th of April and then it will be too late for the march to have any effect. I am apprehensive. I think there is a strong possibility that there may be some physical violence. I think it will be low key and I don't think it will be very widespread, but I am afraid it may occur. I have found in the House that little things tend, surprisingly, to sway some members of the House. I first learned this in the early spring of 1964, when the children were killed in Birmingham. A church was blown up and some children were killed. We had been trying for weeks to get a bill out of the Judiciary Committee and we were able to do it within 48 hours after the bombing. That shocked the conscience of the members of the Judiciary Committee, and the American people. The reverse also can happen. I think the march on Washington on August 28, 1963, was a very constructive and useful thing. As it turned out it was not only peaceful, but was participated in by a large cross-section of Americans. This one is going to be quite different. It is for a different purpose and I think it will be more hazardous to keep the peace.

I do not really have any final conclusion or judgment on where and when Martin Luther King should march, but I am convinced that he has changed for the better the lives of a lot of Negro people because he had the courage to march. He started some problems in the South, a long time ago, and I reckon he's going to keep on.* Sometimes it helps, sometimes it doesn't.

* This speech was given on the 29th of March, 1968, and Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated the following Thursday, April 4th, 1968. [Ed.]

Question: Congressman, you speak mostly of the white and black problem. How does the Mexican-American and American Indian fit into this ghetto problem?

Answer: Well, the American Indian was well represented on this Commission by Senator Harris, but I kept telling the Commission, "We don't have to worry about them because we know we could whip them." To try to answer your question more seriously, I think that there isn't the same kind of racial discrimination problem directed toward

the Mexican-American as there is toward the Negro. His problems are different. They may be very harsh in some parts of the Southwest, but they are not nearly as complex as the Negro's. He has been able to move into suburban areas in large cities much easier than the Negro has. I suppose the reason the Commission did not discuss that problem in any great detail was that it was not Mexican-Americans who were rioting in the streets. I do not want anybody to conclude that the way to get sympathy is to go out and burn down buildings. I do not think that is true at all, and I certainly do not advocate it, but we had a rather special challenge to look at the disorders in the summer of 1967 and they were not the result of discrimination against Mexican-Americans or Puerto Ricans or Indians.

I think there are a great number of problems in this nation that we ought to turn our attention to, besides the problems of the Negroes.

Question: Congressman, would you address yourself specifically to the role of the slum landlord?

Answer: It's true, particularly in some of the big eastern cities that residential slum property is a very lucrative business. When you have a system that confines the Negro to a relatively small area, you have a good market for any kind of housing unit. The Negro does not have the home market to shop in that other people do. He has to take what he can get, and the building inspection and safety people in the major cities just do not seem capable of forcing compliance with health and safety codes. Mayor Lindsay alluded to the fact that there may be a little skulduggery between the building and safety departments and the slum landlord. There are major code violations that are never successully prosecuted, and some of our tax laws encourage letting property become dilapidated. If you improve it your taxes are higher; you do not have to improve it to get tenants because the tenants are forced into the area.

We asked ghetto residents, "What made you riot? What was your complaint?" Housing was down in the middle of the list. We recommended 600,000 new housing units — not necessarily newly constructed, but 600,000 units to be available to people who now live in ghettos. There are a number of ways to acquire these new units, there are various federal programs, grant supplements, the old traditional public housing, and urban redevelopment. Based on the statistics we had, it looked like 600,000 families needed to be moved out of the sub-standard ghetto areas and into decent living quarters. I do not anticipate that Congress will finance this program at that level this year.

Question: Some journalists are saying that Martin Luther King is in danger of losing his leadership of the Negro people, that he's too moderate. They predict that his march on Washington was perhaps his

last major leadership. Do you find evidence to support the claim that Negroes are leaning more and more to activist leaders?

Answer: Yes. I would not want to over-state the role of "Negro leaders" because I think the great mass of Negro people do not follow anybody, nor are they very much concerned about all of these things; but we did try to do some in-depth studies of the black militant groups. Although they are relatively small, they are highly militant and well organized. I know they are of great concern to Roy Wilkins. He is terribly concerned about what the black militant may do insofar as peace and constructive evolution in race relations is concerned. I do not think the black militant will ever accomplish what the N.A.A.C.P. and Martin Luther King have accomplished, by keeping their efforts basically within the law, and certainly within nonviolence. The angry young men who think they are going to overthrow this country, remind me of my 14-year old boy coming in and telling me he is going to take over. He isn't really going to do that, and the black militants aren't really going to take over this country.

Question: Congressman, will the war in Viet Nam prevent allocation of necessary funds to implement the suggestions in the Commission's report?

Answer: No, I do not think so at all. I do not see those issues as being related in the sense that we can do only one or the other. I think they are both of great concern to the President. It is extremely difficult to get Congress to put up the funds necessary to launch any of these rather massive programs we talk about, but that is not just because there is a war on. With all the expense of the war we are not really pushed, so far as our resources are concerned. On December 7th, 1941, we had real problems, but we did not sit down on the morning of the 8th and say, "Shall we fight in Europe and give California to the Japanese or shall we fight in the Pacific and give Europe to Hitler?" We had two major problems. We had two threats to this nation. We were willing to devote whatever was necessary to fight in both areas. I do not think Ho Chi Minh and his followers are going to overthrow our country today, and I do not think the Negro is either. I do think these two symbolize the problems of this country and we need to devote our attention to both. We must not do one to the exclusion of the other.

Question: How about the Baltimore police's idea of going into ghetto communities and working, living, setting up store front service centers, talking to the people, and trying to solve their problems, by carrying on a day-to-day dialogue with them?

Answer: I had not heard about it in Baltimore. I heard about it in Los Angeles and they are not quite that far along. The idea is almost

exactly what the Commission recommended. The most important single thing we can do is try to get the ghetto residents in to law enforcement as best we can and take it into the area as a service rather than an arm of the police. I think this summer we must worry about the same things as last summer. There are black militants who are running around trying to foment minor revolutions. You have to keep your eye on them too. The police did that in 1967 with great success. These fellows laid great plans to assassinate several Negro leaders, but were thwarted in their efforts.

Question: It seems that the Commission feels that this country is not moving fast enough in solving these racial problems. Does the evidence indicate that it is only through riots that these problems can be brought to the attention of the country in such a manner that action will be taken?

Answer: That is a very hard question because you hang yourself with the answer almost either way. I am not so pessimistic as to suggest to the American people that it is only through violence that they find progress. I think we have experienced much progress in this country over the last couple of generations. I think that the riots are dramatic evidence of the fact that we are not moving fast enough and that there are pressures building up that outstrip what we have been able to do so far. I would hope that we would become sufficiently aware from our experiences, thus far, to move in a direction that will prevent further disorders. In an immediate and direct way disorder is very counter-productive. I think that Detroit probably has suffered from the worst Police Department of any northern city, ever, but I also think it is probably worse today than it has ever been. This is due to the kind of violence they experienced in the summer of 1967. If there is another eruption of disorder, outside force will have to be applied almost immediately or there will be a slaughter of the people who live in Detroit, by the police who serve them. There is every indication that that is true even though they have a very good mayor who is working very hard to prevent it. I just reread some of the testimony from Detroit relating to activities during the height of the riots; you couldn't believe the brutality, the almost barbaric activities of the police department. In this context, the riot wasn't productive.

Question: Isn't it politically unrealistic to talk about being able to afford both the war in Viet Nam and the solution to the Negro problem, when war in Viet Nam has already cut into poverty funds and blocked the Rat Control Bill the first time around?

Answer: Perhaps so. It seemed to us that we ought to objectively decide what needed to be done. I do not believe that these cuts are the result of the war in Viet Nam or a mass of defective expendi-

tures, because the same people who are opposing the spending now, have been successfully opposing it for many, many years. Today we are spending more in federal aid to education, the war on poverty, aid to police, and federal housing than we were spending in 1964. I am not at all sure that if the war were to end tomorrow — and God knows I hope it does — we would turn around and say, "All right, Department of Defense, send your money to H.E.W." We still have the same political argument, the same forces to battle with, to get enough public resources to meet these problems. The guns and butter argument will become a balanced budget argument.

Question: With the exception of Roy Wilkins, all the black leaders are in favor of black power in the conservative sense. What effect will that concept have in the black community?

Answer: I think that words are not what the man who says them means, but rather what the listener thinks they mean, and I believe that most people, when they think of black power in this country, do not think of it in the constructive sense that you tried to express. My apprehension of black power in the constructive sense is that it tends to solidify segregation. There is nothing, so far as violence is concerned, wrong with people saying, "Well, you know, all of us Negroes have to live in this part of town so Negroes get all our business and we should have our own factories and so forth, and we should have better housing." I think that moves us in the wrong direction. I do not think we can have black power and white power in this country. I think we are going to have to rub out those lines. I do not see, even in the constructive black power proposals, a good long-term answer to America's problems. In the short run it will improve a lot of lives; maybe it is for the better.

Question: How much need is there for Negroes to break the law in order to improve their status?

Answer: It seemed to us that one of the causes of the violence was that they had seen a pattern of violence directed by whites against Negroes in the South for generations. A kid who was not fit to sit at a lunch counter and knew he was going to go to jail for sitting there, is not very different from one who runs down the street, busts a window and grabs a case of liquor, and goes to jail for that. I think the knowledge that Negroes get lynched in Mississippi and the murderer is never prosecuted successfully, bears on the problem. When a kid tries to go to a white school, he is beat up, intimidated, and the Governor of a sovereign state blocks the schoolhouse door, respect for law breaks down. It seemed to us, from our interviews with people, to be something that they were very conscious of, they say "You tell us law and order man, what do you do?"

Question: Congressman Corman, will you comment on the debate relating to the ghetto schools — integrating the schools, busing, and so forth?

Answer: There were some within the Commission who felt that we ought to give our first attention to improving education in the ghettos. I hold the opposite view. I feel very strongly that we must immediately integrate our schools. Segregated housing and segregated schools are the cornerstones of racial discrimination in the North and the West and there cannot be, and never will be, good segregated schools for Negroes. The sociological impact of telling youngsters, "You're that color so you go there, and for the rest of your life, you're going to be that color so we'll go here and you go there," just perpetuates the problem. It seems to me we ought to turn our resources and our talents into integrating American education. We have a lot of ways of doing it. We have a lot of resources for doing it and the Constitution says we must do it.